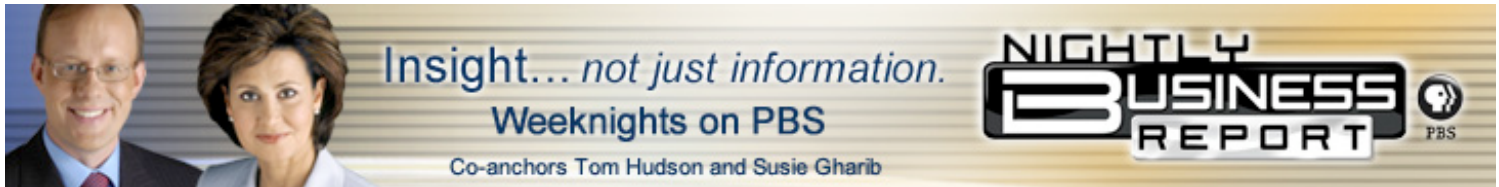


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Debussy, (Achille-)Claude

Born: St. Germain-en-Laye, 22 Aug 1862

Died: Paris, 25 March 1918

Nationality: French composer

He studied with Guiraud and others at the Paris Conservatoire (1872-84) and as prizewinner went to Rome (1885-7), though more important impressions came from his visits to Bayreuth (1888, 1889) and from hearing Javanese music in Paris (1889). Wagner's influence is evident in the cantata "La damoiselle élue" (1888) and the "Cinq, poèmes de Baudelaire" (1889) but other songs of the period, notably the settings of Verlaine ("Ariettes oubliées, "Trois mélodies," "Fêtes galantes, set 1") are in a more capricious style, as are parts of the still somewhat Franckian G minor String Quartet (1893); in that work he used not only the Phrygian mode but also less standard modes, notably the whole-tone mode, to create the floating harmony he discovered through the work of contemporary writers: Mallarmé in the orchestral "Prélude à 'L'après-midi d'un faune'" (1894) and Maeterlinck in the opera "Pelléas et Mélisande," dating in large part from 1893-5 but not completed until 1902. These works also brought forward a fluidity of rhythm and colour quite new to Western music.

"Pelléas," with its rule of understatement and deceptively simple declamation, also brought an entirely new tone to opera - but an unrepeatable one. Debussy worked on other opera projects and left substantial sketches for two pieces after tales by Poe ("Le diable dans le beffroi" and "La chute de la maison Usher"), but nothing was completed. Instead the main works were orchestral pieces, piano sets and songs.

The orchestral works include the three "Nocturnes" (1899), characteristic studies of veiled harmony and texture ("Nuages"), exuberant cross-cutting ("Fêtes") and seductive whole-tone drift ("Sirènes"). "La mer" (1905) essays a more symphonic form, with a finale that works themes from the first movement, though the centrepiece ("Jeux de vagues") proceeds much less directly and with more variety of colour. The three "Images" (1912) are more loosely linked, and the biggest, "Ibéria," is itself a triptych, a medley of Spanish allusions. Finally the ballet "Jeux" (1913) contains some of Debussy's strangest harmony and texture in a form that moves freely over its own field of motivic connection. Other late stage works, including the ballets "Khamma" (1912) and "La boîte à joujoux" (1913) and the mystery play "Le martyre de St. Sébastien" (1911), were not completely orchestrated by Debussy, though "St. Sébastien" is remarkable in sustaining an antique modal atmosphere that otherwise was touched only in relatively short piano pieces (e.g. "La cathédrale engloutie").

The important piano music begins with works which, Verlaine fashion, look back at rococo decorousness with a modern cynicism and puzzlement ("Suite bergamasque," 1890; "Pour le


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piano," 1901). But then, as in the orchestral pieces, Debussy began to associate his music with visual impressions of the East, Spain, landscapes etc, in a sequence of sets of short pieces. His last volume of "Etudes" (1915) interprets similar varieties of style and texture purely as pianistic exercises and includes pieces that develop irregular form to an extreme as well as others influenced by the young Stravinsky (a presence too in the suite "En blanc et noir" for two pianos, 1915). The rarefaction of these works is a feature of the last set of songs, the "Trois poèmes de Mallarmé"; (1913), and of the Sonata for flute, viola and harp (1915), though the sonata and its companions also recapture the inquisitive Verlainian classicism. The planned set of six sonatas was cut short by the composer's death from rectal cancer.

Selected Works Include:

Operas

- Pelléas et Mélisande (1902)
- several sketches, incl. La chute de la maison Usher (perf. 1977)

Cantatas

- Le printemps (1882)
- L'enfant prodigue (1884)
- La damoiselle élue (1888)

Play with music

- Le martyre de St. Sébastien (1911)

Orchestral music, ballets

- Printemps (1887)
- Fantaisie for piano and orchestra (1890)
- Prélude à "L'après-midi d'un faune" (1894)
- Nocturnes (1899)
- La mer (1905)
- Danse sacrée et danse profane (1904)
- Khamma (1912)
- Images (1912)
- La boîte à joujoux (1913)
- Jeux (1913)

Chamber music

- Str Qt (1893)
- Syrinx, fl (1913)
- Vc Sonata (1915)
- Sonata, fl, va, harp (1915)
- Vn Sonata (1917)

Piano music

- Suite bergamasque (1890)
- Pour le piano (1901)
- D'un cahier d'esquisses (1903)
- L'isle joyeuse (1904)
- Masques (1904)
- Images (1905, 1907)
- Préludes (1909-10, 1912-13)
- Six épigraphes antiques, 2/4 hands (1914)
- Etudes (1915)
- En blanc et noir, 2 pf (1915)

Songs

- Ariettes oubliées (1888)
- Cinq poèmes de Baudelaire (1889)
- Trois mélodies (1891)
- Fêtes galantes (1891, 1904)
- Proses lyriques (1893)
- Chansons de Bilitis (1898)
- Trois ballades de Villon (1910)
- Trois poèmes de Mallarmé (1913)

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